

Kashmiri women in the reflections of Mahjoor's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Mahjoor is considered among others as the ace and quintessential poet of Kashmir. It is because of his nationalistic poetry that he attained the title of *Shaire-e-Kashmir* (National poet of Kashmir). His poetry besides being Romantic also reflects the pain, trauma and pathetic situation of women of his era. Unlike his other Romantic predecessor poets like Rusl Mir and Mahmood Gami, who left no stone unturned to praise the beauty of the women folk. But contrary to these poets, Mahjoor's poetry is full of gloom and predicament while dealing with women. He has touched the heartbreak condition of women in his poetry which tarnishes the emotional sentiments of readers while reading. He not only adored the beauty like John Keats and John Donne but also praises their contribution in building the social structure and society despite being the victims of inequality and oppression. The women in the poetry of Mahjoor are frightened and wounded because of the patriarchal dominance and he wants to put balm on their wounds. When the Whole India was fighting against the Britishers for freedom, the people of Kashmir couldn't that influence? At that time, Mahjoor's poetry revolutionized the Nationalist movement in Kashmir too and also incited and encouraged the local populace to rise against the full *dirigisme* of the rulers. This paper unfolds the ache and gloom of Kashmiri women in the poetry of Mahjoor during the heyday of Kashmir's freedom struggle against Dogra rule. The paper explores the difference of the approach towards women by Mahjoor's predecessor Rusl Mir and Mahmood Gami in their poetry.

Key Words: Kashmiri Women, Romantic, Folk, Mahjoor, Struggle

Poets of Kashmir in their poetry extolled the Kashmiri woman since times immemorial which includes Fazil's *Kraala Koor* (The Potter's Daughter), Roshan's *Shaheed Sunz Maij* (The Martyr's Mother) or Nadim's *Dal Haanzni Hond Vatsun* (The Song of the Boatwoman). It may appear as if every woman in Kashmir will pride herself on the poetry or a piece of a poem written on her.

Among the women poets, Lal Ded and Habba Khatoon had been the prime and prototypical poets of Kashmir by giving vent to their emotions and personnel tragedies much before any other poet of Kashmir. However in the 20th century, Mahjoor's poetry came to the fore, which made him among others as the greatest and supreme poets of Kashmir. It is very unfortunate to say that most of his work is still unexplored and the educated folk of the valley are still not acquainted with his poetry. In the middle part of his poetic career, his poetry dealt with the acclamation of the natural beauty of Kashmir. As a lover of beauty, he adored the beauty of the Kashmir through his poetry. Besides, praising the beauty of

Kashmir, he also reflects the pain and struggle of the people and became their spokesperson *par excellence*. After 1931, his poetry revolutionized the freedom struggle of the valley against the Dogra rulers. The poetry of Mahjoor is not only about the apparent beauty of Kashmir but he has also touched the apathy and pathetic condition of women folk, which touches the reader's strings of heart while reading.

His predecessor Romantic poets like Rusl Mir, Ghani Kashmiri, just to name a few showered a volley of praise on the apparent beauty of women without highlighting a nanoscopic of their pain faced by them in their day to day lives. In his poetry, he sees his beloved as floral mien or a beauty surrounded by the things decorated. He says

*Ahqé pechaan cho arq vanan manz
Kathe ha zoon zan dhon shahmaran manz
Naqshe cheenus zu naar nachli lo
Bosh husnuk keh rozni laliye (Kashmir Sentinel, Par. 45-60)*

Like an ivy caught in violets,
A full moon trapped by pythons two;
Or a beauty of china
Wearing the sacred thread

The main forte of Rusl Mir in his poetry was the unconditional love towards his beloved. But unlike him, Mahjoor's poetry was totally different from theirs and deviated from them so far as approach towards women is concerned. Without using the decorative language like his predecessor romantic poets to praise the beauty of the women, Mahjoor's case is different. He has always seen the glimpses of oppression and slavery on their faces. He firmly believed that unless and until women is set free from social dogmas and patriarchal domination, their emancipation would be difficult. Adjacent to adoring their beauty, he wants to put balm on their wounds and tragedies. Before him Arnimal and Habba Khatoon too had given space to the feelings and emotions of women in their poetry, but Mahjoor became their representative and voice of their sufferings and traumas.

Mahjoor has depicted them as victims in the society who had always been at the receiving end of tyranny and oppression. To safeguard their honour and dignity, they call for help everywhere. Their faces are filled with dust and their hair had turned curly because of their economic dependence. Although, he has not named any women directly in his poetry but the below verses from his poetry are an eye opener of women's call for help and her sincerity and loyalty.

I waited like a patient glacier,
Melting with yearning for you;
At last, grown desperate, I hurled myself
Into the Ganga of love.
Since you were in breathless haste, I couldn't
See your face or pour out my heart,
But stood speechless, with floods of tears
Streaming from my eyes. (Classic Poetry Series 27)

These verses show the helplessness of women in the patriarchal domination. While reading and hearing these verses definitely reduces the pain of women as it forces them to go to the past to reckon about the pain their mothers had undergone. By touching the social and political themes in his poetry, his concern for humanity earned him reputation and fame worldwide. Jawaharlal Handoo writes, "...with more meaningful themes, symbols, sights... Mahjoor laid the foundation of progressive trends in Kashmiri literature by introducing social and political themes in poetry". (Handoo 145)

The poem *Poshe Matih Janano* by Mahjoor is a reflection of women who has undergone sufferings and pangs of pain in her lifetime. It is said that Mahjoor has written this beautiful poem after hearing the melancholy poem by Habba Khatoon *Walaa Ha Poshai Madnoo*, where she laments the separation of her husband Yusuf Shahi Chak after being taken away from Kashmir by the Mughul Emperor Akbar in the 16th century.

*You took my heart and fled
Without a warning stealthily.
Come, Love, O come to me.
Come friend, let us in the prime of youth
gather jasmine while we may.
He who departs does not return (Khayal 84)*

Mahjoor has fiercely written about the plight of women, not written by any other poet in the valley. Poems like *Graes Koer* (Peasant Girl) and *Kasher Zanana* (Kashmiri woman) are his master pieces dealing with the woman populace.

*What gulfs between you and highborn dames!
You are the soul of freedom and flowers,
And the dames languish in shuttered prisons.
When you entered the garden - O what coy grace! -
What did the flowers whisper to you?
You've robbed the bulbuls of their speech.
You wear no jewels, but your lovely skin
Sparkles with millions of them!*

Glory to the jeweler who wrought this miracle! (Classic Poetry Series 14)

Mahjoor is trying to elevate or equate the status of lower class women in the poem *Graes Koer* with the women from upper class. He tries to encourage them and tries to elevate their dignity and honour and compares them at par with the women from other classes. It was an attempt to free the women from the social dogma, inequality and domination. Rather than decorating *via* the artificial instruments and Jewellery, Mahjoor showers full praise on their beauty to make them believe that they are below to no one but equal with all. Akhtar Mohi-ud-din says;

In 'Ode to Peasant Girl' he praised her beauty and accomplishments which she had acquired through direct contact with Mother Nature. Her greatest virtue was her labour in the fields. Her hands were beautiful because these were dyed with mud and not with henna. It was the morning breeze in the open fields that lent fragrance to her hair and spring sun gave rosy hue to her cheeks" (Mohi-ud-din 88-89)

It can also be argued that Mahjoor nullifies and invalidates the highhandedness and showiness of superiority from the women of the upper class. By distorting the binaries of discrimination, Mahjoor comes as rescuer for them by comparing them at par with any other women in the world. He portrayed the lady in the poem as brave, strong with dignity and respect devoid of any artificial beauty and cosmetics. Contrary with the women folk from elite class, she is depicted as a lady busy with nature all the time. I believe that she represents every women of Kashmir with her simple attire and beauty. After struggling and overcoming all the obstacles and sufferings, the women in Kashmir has had been the member *sine qua non* in ups and downs besides having the burden of household chorus and other domestic activities. Professor Saif-u-Din Soz says,

Mahjoor was perhaps the only versifier of Kashmir who depicted love, concern for nature and human values as intimately as the great English poet, Wordsworth! When one of his poems, The country lass was shown to Rabindra Nath Tagore by the well known Indian writer, Devindra Satyarthi, Tagore was deeply impressed by this poem and he got it published (Soz, Par.6).

By writing about the day to day affairs of daily life, Mahjoor was highly sympathetic with the sufferings and trauma of women. The middle period of his poetic career most dealt with romantic themes but what mesmerizes the reader was the disturbance which he wanted to convey through his poetry after becoming the mouth piece of a dejected lover. T N Kaul says, "... his extraordinary simplicity of language, fascinating style and great ability to convey the lover's cravings and aspirations, hopes and fears, pain and pleasure. (The lover in Kashmiri poetry is usually female). Attracted by the beloved's charm, a damsels sings:

*The din of thy unseen
Beauty rose, maddening
My heart. I repaired to
Thy audience*" (Raina 86)

Apart from the Romantic, Mahjoor had a craving to side with the woman when it comes to despotism and pain. His poetry didn't come out *ex-nihilo*, but it had a context at its back which had forced Mahjoor to be a representative poet apart from being a Romantic. The deep pain articulated by Mahjoor in his poetry is because of the long separation of the beloved from her lover. It throws a deep light on the mentality of a poet, who had studied and observed the suffering of the women. These things make him the visionary poet of Kashmir because of his pain and concern for his women apart from the struggle during the freedom movement. The lover expresses her pain and trauma in these words after her separation from the beloved:

*Don't cold-shoulder me;
This intolerable pain of*

Separation will only

Drive me to suicide. (Raina 85-87)

The lover blames beloved of being indifferent towards her and threatens her of committing suicide if he rejects her and continues to remain away from her. This extravagantly shows the dependence of women on the man as Elaine Showalter calls the "Second Sex".

The feeble and pitiable condition of women is expressed in these words after the latter's continuous indifference towards her:

Come and listen to my woes,

I'll unfold my charred bosom

To thee; or wilt thou come

Only after I'm no more? (Raina 87-88)

The pleading and continuous beseeching of women to his lover is an eye opener of being a victim of society during his time. After witnessing the helplessness and apathy of women, Mahjoor as a romantic poet not only was the admirer of the beauty around him but the conditions of people especially the women moved him and impels him to express their woes in his poetry. Through these things, he appears as a different poet from other contemporary Romantic or his Predecessor poets.

The continuous suffering and pain is unbearable for the women and gives vent to her emotions in these verses through the mouth piece of Mahjoor:

...I Shed tears of blood; the

Pearls of my necklace fell

Apart, one after another.

I keep vigil to sift

Saffron the whole night,

Come out in the moonlight

And see my handiwork (Raina 88)

After passing all the limits and barriers of tolerance, she issues a warning to his lover if he is still reluctant to come:

Flowers dye their garments

In my blood-red tears.

If I pass away so young

Who will make thy life colourful?

Pray come, as I long to

Spread the red carpet to the

Bedecked inner sanctum,

Confide in thee, and die (Raina 86- 89)

At another place, he says:

Rang Rang dokh te daid tchalaan ayas

Lolas chus karaan lole mat lai (Atash 390-91)

Pain and suffering of every type I bear

I would love my lover more and more (Self Translation)

In these lines, it seems as if the women is helpless and has no way to go but to love and bear every type of pain she is offered. This conveys the trauma and emotional agitation of women of Kashmir. Women in Mahjoor' poetry pleads and appeals for help from all quarters.

The way Mahjoor has indirectly touched the women's backwardness and retrograde aspects are still prevalent in the society. Highly concerned about their backwardness and exploitation, he in a way criticizes his famous romantic predecessor Rusl Mir by saying:

Shah abadi mir kyazi os tchandaan kandharich zoon

Tas koneh tchetas aes pewaan tchand harich zoon (Atash 392)

Why was Mir yearning for moon from Kandhaar
His concern for the moon of *tchandhar* was less (self translation)

This highlights the concern of Mahjoor for Habba Khatoon (T Chandhaar, A place where Habba Khatton took birth) in general and the women of Kashmir in particular. Even the poet Philosopher of the East Dr. Iqbal has highlighted the need and importance of women by these words:

*Wajood-e-zan se hai Tasveer Kainaat Mai Rang
Isse ke saaz se hai zindagi ka soz duroon (Zarb-e Kaleem 103-106)*

The picture that this world presents from woman gets its tint and scents:
She is the lyre that can impart pathos and warmth to human heart

Trying to become a representative of the sufferings of the Habba Khatoon, he in a way reproaches with Rusl Mir's view. The things which the Kashmiri women couldn't express themselves, Mahjoor becomes their embouchure. As Naseem Shafai observes, "The tragedy with Kashmiri women is that they don't speak out. They are too shy to air their views or for that matter to express their feelings. Since our women usually don't express themselves, someone has to speak on their behalf. Kashmiri women need to write and write with a sense of devotion and responsibility. Our women are very capable and gifted but since they are shy by nature, their talent remains hidden". (qtd. in Contemporary Kashmiri women's poetry, Par. 7)

In conclusion, I can say Mahjoor expresses the suppressed emotions of the woman which they couldn't express themselves. In his poetry, woman is always brave, respectful, dignified and reputable.

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Conflicts of interests

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Data and materials availability

All data associated with this study are present in the paper.

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